

Biographical Sketch of Eugene Burton Fleming

Believed to have been written by Elsie Ellen Fleming

Eugene Berton (sic) was born at Pepin Feb. 3 1871, being the fifth child. He spent the greater part of his life here and attended the Hicks Valley sch school, but when in his teens he went to Dak. Where he spent several years, returning home in his early twenties.



On June 10, 1896 he was married to Miss Eva Wheeler also of Pepin, Wis. For a time they lived in Hicks Valley where Altha M. was born Feb. 23, 1900, on the old Fleming farm on upper end of the valley. Later they moved to Plum Creek on the David Boyd farm, where Altha died on Jan. 4, 1903. Later they lost much of their home furnishings by fire.

They then bought the Old Rowley property east of Potato Hill where they built up a home. But, while still on the Boyd place Elsie Ellen was born Jan, 8- 1904. In Jan 13. 1910 Elvin was born. Later a little daughter Dorothy was born Nov. 6. 1915 but living a very short time passed on the same day. Eva lived till Nov. 24 when she too passed away. On June 5. 1917 Bert was married to Gertrude Gray of Dakota.

“Bert”, as he was called, managed to obtain about 6 years of education before along with an older brother Milton (Ebb), becoming the primary labor force on the John Fleming home farm. Bert may also have spent a short time doing farm work somewhere in Berlin, North Dakota.

Recollections of Elvin G. Fleming (son), and Elvin E. Fleming (grandson) 1998

On 10 June 1896, Bert married Eva Almyra Wheeler (born 21 July 1875) daughter of Gilbert L. and Ellen M. (Nichols) Wheeler also residents of the Town of Pepin, Pepin County, Wisconsin. Bert and Eva had five children of which two, Elsie and Elvin, survived childhood and lived well into their nineties. A house fire on his first rented farm in Plum Creek, Town of Frankfurt, caused Bert to have fear of fire and led to his restarting to farm in the Town of Pepin in Circa 1906 on 160 acres in section 29, town 23, range 14W, just east of “Potato Hill”. The summer of 1915 is as good as it got. The scene is on the south side of the east ridge a quarter of a mile off the local landmark known as ‘Potato Hill’ or more popularly, “Spud Hump”. At left in the background is an out house. The right hand wing of the house is new. In the right background is seen part of a detached garage situated on a higher level of the hill. Pic Pictured from left: Elvin G., age 5; Bert; Elsie, age



11; and Eva. The many young Walnut trees that grew on the farm gave the farm it's name, ‘Walnut Grove Farm’. At right is a new, 1915 Maxwell. Whenever he could, Bert parked his automobiles front first down hill, preferably on a fairly steep slope to enable starting it without having to crank it by hand or later, use the starter. To the immediate right there is a dug-out road wrapping around a point of the hill leading to the fields with heavy loam soil on top and in back of the hill. The other farm buildings were located off the photo to the right, and the larger sandy fields lay to the south and southeast, mostly across the town road. There, on the “Walnut Grove Farm”, Bert remained for the rest of his life.

Eva's death 25 November 1915 left Bert with an 11 year old daughter (Elsie) and a 5 year old son (Elvin) to raise. For a brief time after Eva's death, Mabel Fleming, widow of Bert's brother James, and her three sons, Clint, Jack, and Dick helped out. Eventually Bert advertised for and accepted a housekeeper, Gertrude Grey (born 9 October 1874). They were latter married.

Much of Bert's personality reflected a 19th century outlook. For most tasks, he choose hand labor over mechanization. Folk lore took the place of science and dictated such things as; potato had to be planted in the correct phase of the moon and corn could not be planted until the Maple leaves were the size of a squirrels ear. Bert was rarely heard to utter a conventional swear word, but freely used a lexicon of colorful expletives such as; "aye-gad!", "lickety-whoa-bob!", "to beat sixty!" and etc.. In like manner, Bert, along with many of his generation had difficulty adjusting to the onset of the mechanical age, much the same as adults have difficulty adjusting to the onset of personal computer technology at the end of the 20th century. Bert could never master the synchronization of the engine speed and the clutch. Starting out always involved a big lurch or as cars became more powerful, the spinning of wheels, digging ruts or on soft soils, getting stuck. For that purpose, he always carried a come-a-long with which by hooking onto a nearby tree, he could pull himself out.

Bert valued work for its own sake and what it accomplished, mattered less. It seemed that he would deliberately choose to do things the hard way. At one time, Bert owned a portable 'saw rig', for cutting logs crosswise in 16 to 18 inch lengths to be used for firewood. The rig consisted of one of those single cylinder, four cycle engines with two large, external flywheels to keep up the momentum between when the engine fired in a put - - - put - - - put - - - fashion. The saw was on one end of a shaft on which another flywheel and pulley was found on the other end of the shaft. The saw was driven by a belt from a pulley on one of the flywheels on the engine. The engine was cranked with a handle on the opposite flywheel. Bert never took the time to properly align the two pulleys, but rather, drove steel stakes in strategic places to guide the belt so it would not fly off either of the pulleys. Since the engine was easier to start if it were not also turning the saw, Bert would start the engine first, then put the belt on the spinning pulley with his shoulder. One day, the pulley and belt grabbed his jacket and a back portion of Bert's shoulder. It jerked him off his feet, flipped him over and slammed him to the ground, miraculously without impaling him on one of those stakes. A swelling developed on Bert's shoulder and eventually he consulted a doctor about it. But Bert refused to pay what he considered to be an exorbitant fee for having it taken care of, and the swelling continued to grow. Eventually, it grew to about 6 inches wide and 4 inches high tapering down the back of his shoulder to his waist. From one profile, he appeared hump backed even though his posture was remarkably erect. A slim man, he always wore 'braces' (suspenders) which served to emphasis the appearance of the growth on the one side of his back.

Bert and Gertie retired on a 10 acre tract in the southwestern corner of the farm -- the part that had been the horse pasture and a camping ground for passing bands of Indians and later, Gypsies, the same part where Elvin G. Fleming would eventually build his retirement home. Here a cow, some chickens, berry patches, apple and plumb trees, a kitchen and a vegetable garden kept them busy between occasional fishing outings in the backwaters of the Chippewa and Mississippi, and in the bower pits along the Pepin to Nelson and Nelson to Wabasha dike roads. Short trips to pick blueberries or to shop in Durand or Wabasha along with occasional trips to visit his daughter, Elsie Ellen (Fleming) Baumgarten at Morristown, MN rounded out their lives. Gertrude died 22 January 1952 and in the night of 21-22 December 1955, Eugene Burton Fleming died in his sleep ironically from smoke inhalation as his house caught fire, probably from the accumulation of creosote in the chimney caused by Berts overly cautious habit of choking down fires in the heating stove.